

Report on Homer's Iliad

So often in my teaching of this class, I've had female students suggest to me that they didn't really care for the Iliad, as there was little therein to speak to them as women readers. Not being a woman, I can't speak to how the Iliad may or may not appeal to a woman, but I did decide to look at how women are presented in the poem. As a war poem the primary focus of the work is on men, who are the warriors. Even in our own day, films about war (at least films about wars before the Vietnam era, or filmed before Vietnam) tend to focus on the male warriors, rather than on the women, though there are exceptions, such as Mrs. Miniver, which focuses on a woman's efforts on the home front during WWII. What I found was that women are largely a pretty background to the action of the work, and that women have little effect on the action of the poem, unless they are divine, in which they have some direct influence.

As I have used a prose translation of the work, I shall not be using book and line numbers to identify quotations and passages, but will be giving the page number from the text of Chase and Perry's translation.

First of all, how are women described in the work, and is there anything distinctive or personal in the description? Women are largely described in terms of their appearance: women or goddesses are "white-armed," used of Hera repeatedly (pp. 36, 39, 100, 141, 142 and elsewhere) and of Aphrodite (p. 97), "fair-cheeked," used of Chryseis and Briseis (pp. 38, 41 and 306) and of Themis (p. 236), "fair-girdled," used of women generally (p. 44), of Cleopatra (p. 159) and

Iphis (p. 160), "fair-haired," used of Briseis (pp. 63 and 134) and Aphrodite (p. 134), "goddess among women" of Alcestis (p. 64), "fairest of face," used of Alcestis (p. 64), and of Helen (p. 71), and Laodice (p. 116), "fair-gowned," used of the Achaean women (p. 100), "fair-tressed" of the Trojan women (p. 119) and of Hecamede (p. 188).

Sometimes women are described in terms of their apparel or other qualities - Helen is "veiled in fair white linen" (p. 71), Aphrodite has an ambrosial robe (p. 98), the Trojan women have "trailing robes" (p. 123), Hera has a "golden throne" (p. 226) and Thetis wears a dark-veil (p. 368). Other examples could be adduced.

Some phrases are used primarily of one woman or goddess. Hera is "ox-eyed" (pp. 144, 227), though Clymene is also so described (p. 71). Athena is "bright-eyed" (pp. 39, 91, 99, 123, and elsewhere). Iris is "swift-footed" (pp. 70, 290). Aphrodite is "laughter-loving" (pp. 77, 79, 99, 227).

For the most part these are generic statements suggesting that women of the noble class (we get no women from the lower classes - the women who are slaves, such as Briseis, are from the noble class of a conquered town) are all beautiful. So far as I can tell, though I didn't do a detailed study, the men are likewise generically described, with some phrases being used specifically of one hero - Achilles is swift-footed and Hector has a shining helmet. Menelaus has fair hair, as does Ares. We do not get more active descriptors, though, such as man-killing, a phrase used to describe Hector, and Achilles and some other warriors, or horse-taming, a phrase used to describe Trojans in general and Hector in particular. This would sug-

gest women more as objects to be admired, rather than actors who affect the outcome of a situation.

There seem to be very few outright negative descriptions of women: Iris calls Athena a "shameless vixen" if she doesn't take action (p. 143); Hephaestus calls Hera his "dog-faced mother" (p. 296), and Helen refers to herself as "malicious vixen," in her speech to Hector in Book VI (p. 118). These designations, though, are clearly motivated by the situation - Iris hopes to spur Athena to action, and acts like the Greek commanders do when challenging their warriors to fight; Hephaestus still has issues over his mother's rejection of him because of his deformity, and Helen is involved in a certain amount of self-pity and denigration, perhaps hoping for the response she does get, reassuring her.

That said, women are generally viewed as objects, and men as actors. The Iliad begins with Agamemnon wanting to keep his prize, Chryseis, and then taking Achilles' prize, Briseis, because he is without prize. In that such action precipitates the action of the poem, women are important, but only as pawns, not in directing the action. And they largely accept their position. Briseis, though probably not happy about her enslavement, seems to accept it, even eulogizing the dead Patroclus, who helped her see that being with Achilles isn't so bad, even though Achilles killed her husband. "[Y]ou would not even let me weep when swift Achilles slew my husband and sacked godlike Mynes' city, but said you would make me the wedded wife of godlike Achilles... Therefore I mourn you without ceasing..." (p. 307). In a similar way, Andromache, though she raises objections about her

husband's war activities and their possible disastrous circumstances, submits to his decision to keep fighting. The best she can do is bewail the decision as she returns home to woman's work (p. 120f.).

Only three female figures really stand up to males in their lives, the goddesses Hera and Athena, and the mortal, Helen. Hecuba does speak sharply to Priam in Book XXIV: "Where have your senses gone, for which you once were famous among the men of other lands and with which you rule?" (p. 370) But that outburst is due to her fear for his safety, and she does not maintain opposition to his plan to go to the Greek camp.

Hera stands up to Zeus throughout the work. In Book I, she chastises him for conferring with Thetis, Achilles' mother, as she suspects that they are planning actions harmful to the Greeks (pp. 46f.). She quashes Zeus' idea to save his son Sarpedon from death in battle in Book XVI (pp. 260f.). She makes a deal with Zeus to see to Troy's destruction in Book IV, when Zeus is considering a peace treaty between Troy and Greece (p. 79). In some instances, she is successful in getting her way, though often she has to back down, as she does in Book I, at Hephaestus' suggestion (p. 47), and in Book XV, when she feigns ignorance of Poseidon's attack on the Trojans, made possible by Hera's seduction of Zeus (pp. 236f.). She does direct action among the mortals, though. She sends Athena in Book I to keep Achilles from killing Agamemnon. "The white-armed goddess Hera sent me, she who loves and cherishes in her heart both men alike" (p. 39). She rouses Agamemnon to the defense to keep Hector from routing the Greeks in Book VIII (p. 140). She and Athena often plot together on how they

might help the Greeks, or forestall the Trojans, in Book V (p. 108), in Book II (pp. 52ff.), in Book VIII (p. 144). In the battle the gods join, in Book XXI, she soundly thrashes Artemis, tipping her over and causing all her arrows to fall from the huntress' quiver (p. 331). In the case of Zeus, though, her only way of overcoming Zeus, in the Iliad, at any rate, is by seducing him and knocking him out as she does in Book XIV.

The goddess Athena is also a strong female in the work, involving herself in a great deal of direct action against the Trojans, and by advising Achilles (in Book I) and Diomedes (in Books V and VI). She is also the only female figure who gets an arming scene, such as the warriors get, in Book V (p. 106) and again in Book VIII (p. 142). This is fitting as she is a war goddess, and would be inappropriate for any of the other gods, except for the war god, Ares.

Achilles' mom, Thetis, effects actions through persuasion, and generally acts as her son's defender and advocate. In Book I, she prevails upon Zeus to help the Greeks realize their mistake in insulting Achilles, but helping the Trojans a little. In Book XVIII, she convinces Hephaestus to make a special suit of armor for her son. Generally, she is seen as a listener to her son's complaints, or as a wailer at his looming doom. There are references to other action she took which put Zeus and Hephaestus in her debt. In Book I, she reminds Zeus of her help against the other gods, when they tried to revolt (p. 43), and, in Book XVIII, Hephaestus recalls that she was one who helped him when he was thrown out of Olympus by Hera because of his deformity (p. 295).

The goddess Aphrodite is the only other female figure to get quite a bit of attention. She works primarily through seduction and persuasion, as is appropriate for the goddess of love. She does threaten Helen, when Helen tries to stand up to her in Book III, reminding her to obey, "lest I contrive bitter hatred for you among the Trojans and the Danaans alike" (p. 77). When she tries to intervene in the war, however, and save her son, Aeneas, from Diomedes' attack in Book V, she is wounded by the Greek hero and has to withdraw (p. 98), for which she has to be comforted by Dione, who reminds her that war is not her thing (p. 99).

Helen stands up to Aphrodite, whom she recognizes, but quickly backs down in Book III (p. 77), and upbraids her husband, Paris, whom she criticizes for his failure in battle -- "would you had died there" (p. 77), but has ambivalent feelings, as she closes her speech suggesting that she doesn't want him to return to battle, where he might be killed by Menelaus (p. 77). She further criticizes him to Hector in Book VI. "But this man's heart is not firm now nor shall it ever be hereafter" (p. 118). Paris asks that she not criticize him, and is able to win her back, at least somewhat, but is described as having no real authority over her. Then again, though Hector does win his way with Andromache at the close of Book VI, he cannot keep her doubts from surfacing (pp. 120f.).

One point that seems especially remarkable in that Helen's running away with Paris caused the Trojan War is that the Trojans do not criticize her. In Book III, before the teichoscopia ("View from the Wall"), the Trojan elders, though wishing that Helen were back with

the Greeks and they were at peace, do not wonder that such a woman would be worth fighting over (p. 71) and Priam is quite protective of her - "it is not you who are to blame in my eyes" (p. 71), and, in Book XXIV, Helen bewails the dead Hector noting that he always defended her and never attacked her for causing the war, never chastising her, and stopping others from doing so (p. 382).

Overall, we see that women in the Iliad are primarily objects to be fought over, and that they are defined by the men in their lives. We do see, however, that women sometimes will speak up, as Helen did to Paris, or Hera to Zeus, and such verbal assertiveness is not criticized. Women are largely defined as wives or lovers of great men, but can make their concerns heard. Only the goddesses, and chiefly, Athena and Hera, take the initiative which is the man's part in the mortal plane, though they too have to submit ultimately to Zeus, who is seen as especially dangerous, even unstoppable, when angry.

Bibliography

Homer. Iliad. Trans. Alston Hurd Chase and Willam G. Perry Jr. New York: Bantam, 1960.